Researches on the Differences of Kinship Systems

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Kinship system is the way to determine the family members. Based on the Whorfian Hypothesis, this paper takes Chinese and English kinship terms as the research object to make an analysis about the relationship between language and culture from the perspective of sociolinguistics, expecting to find out the major differences and explore the factors leading to them.

Keywords: language, culture, kinship system

Introduction

Language is a system used to convey messages through various backgrounds. It can be symbolic and rule governed with bunch of traits. Culture is the “knowhow” that a person possesses through the task of daily life. The exact relationship between language and culture has long fascinated people with a variety of backgrounds and will continue to fascinate them, because it has been a long-standing claim that the structure of a language determines the way speakers of that language view the world.

This paper takes the Whorfian Hypothesis as the theoretical framework to make a study on the relationship between language and culture from the perspective of kinship system.

The Whorfian Hypothesis

Benjamin Lee Whorf, a student of Sapir, believes that the structure of a language influences how its speakers view the world. This idea is regarded as the Whorfian Hypothesis. According to Whorf (2004, p. 217), the background linguistic system (i.e., the grammar) of each language is not just a reproduction of the voicing ideas, but rather the shaper of ideas as well as the program and guide for the individual’s activity both mentally and emotionally. This opinion shows that language is not just a linguistic identification but a reflection of culture. Different people experience the world differently just because the languages they speak differ structurally. Whorf (2004, p. 217) also argued that no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation. Thus, we hold the idea that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated.

From the above analysis, we can draw the conclusion that Whorf holds strongly the idea that the relationship between language and culture is that the structure of a language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world. Next, we will examine this point from the perspective of kinship

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system between English and Chinese.

Analysis of Kinship Systems

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*, “kin” refers to one’s family and relations. Kinship is an abstract linguistic form which represents the relationship chiefly concerned with blood and marital relationship. Besides, there are also other legal relations that constitute for the whole kinship system. Kinship can be seen as a tool to divide the whole society in various ranks or sections. As for kinship, it may be the keenest and most sustained interest which has great impact on human beings amid all the topics about anthropological linguistics. One of the most interesting ways in which people use language in daily life is to refer to various kinds of kin, and it is not surprising that there is considerable literature on the research of kinship terminology, describing how people use different words to refer to different relatives by blood and marriage. The study of different kinship terminology, especially in the aspects of ethnic and semantic connotations is not only useful for people to learn the culture difference, but also for better mutual communication. Based on the Whorfian Hypothesis, this paper will make a comparative study between Chinese and English kinship system from the perspectives of sociolinguistics.

Addressing terms of appellation in English and Chinese differs a lot. Among various countries and nationalities, the clearest difference may be that between Eastern Asia and Western countries. The following part is to make a detailed analysis on this point from paternal and maternal sides.

Paternal Side

Chinese traditional convention attaches much contact to this. Paternal side can be divided into five major parallel categories as followings: the children of father’s siblings’, father and father’s siblings, children and siblings’ children, father’s parents, and children’s children. This part is the most important and complex one, for example, “great-grandfather (great-grandmother)”, “sister-in-law”, “daughter-in-law”, “uncle (aunt)”, “cousin”, and “granddaughter-in-law”. As a convention, the relationship of marriage and blood tie are also included in this part. It can be divided into three categories. They are husband and husband’s siblings, husband’s parents, and children of husband’s siblings. It is less important than the one below. Also, it mainly includes “father (mother)-in-law”, “brother (sister)-in-law”, and “nephew (niece)”.

In English, taking the word “cousin” for an example, it can refer to all the sisters and brothers in Chinese kinship system, without distinguishing the elder or the younger, males or females, even whether in mother’s clan or father’s clan. Similarly, the word “uncle”, “aunt”, “grandmother”, and “grandfather” also have vague meanings. It is changeable so that in different conditions they are called differently.

Maternal Side

Maternal side can be divided into three major categories. They are mother and mother’s siblings, ego and children of mother’s siblings, and (parents of) mother’s parents. This part is the second important part. It mainly includes “great-grandfather (great-grandmother)”, “uncle”, and “cousin”. It consists of the major kinship system with the paternal side. Similarly, this part can be divided in three categories: wife and wife’s siblings, wife’s parents, and children of wife’s siblings. Also, it is less important than the one below. Its main parts are “father (mother)-in-law”, “brother (sister)-in-law”, and “nephew (niece)”. Similarly, in English, a single word can refer to sisters and brothers in maternal side included in Chinese kinship system.

Causes of the Differences

One interesting and fundamental way in which people use language in daily living is to refer to various kinds of kin. Different kinship systems differ a lot. Some systems are much richer than others, but all make use of such factors as sex, age, generation, blood, and marriage in their organization. When it comes to the topic, most of us want to figure out what lead to the differences. There are several reasons elaborated as follows.

Different Cultural Background

Among various countries and nationalities, the clearest difference may be that between Eastern Asia and Western countries. China has a culture of over 5,000 years, whereas some Western countries, such as America only have a few hundred years. In China, kinship system is so complicated and varied that sometimes even we ourselves do not have a clear classification of blood relatives, direct-related relatives, relatives by marriage, elders and the younger generation, the elderly and young, males and females, and close relatives and distant relatives. They are a really complex system, which includes the influence of the ancient history, political system, and many other factors inherited until now.

Whereas it is not the same in Western countries, what they have been influenced for hundreds of years are individualism, independence, etc. which encourage them to achieve themselves. In English kinship system, as long as they are in the same generation, age seems not that important. On the contrary, in Chinese kinship system, age is very important and it even symbols the politeness and cultivation. If there are several children in a family, they are supposed to call each other with first brother (sister), or second brother (sister). The younger must show respect to the elder, let alone in different generations, such as grandfather and grandmother. The younger must show great respect to them to express politeness. It is a moral principle that everyone should follow. For example, brothers and sisters, no matter which is elder or younger, they are in the same level in a family. Similarly, uncle and aunt, or grandfather and grandmother, they are also in the same level in a family. Only the person with higher hierarchy can call the full name of the lower directly. For example, parents can call their children's full name, while the children should not call their parents' full name directly, which is because of the rule that the lower one cannot call the higher one's full name. Because of this, there is a distinct division of hierarchic system in Chinese kinship system. While in Western countries, there is no such custom for them to obey. The elder and the younger are on the same level. Everyone can call each other's full name; the Western countries' children are becoming more and more casual to call their parents' first name, which will be a very unpleasant thing in China and may indicate terrible relationship of parents and their children. In Western countries, kinship seems of no significance. They do not think the hierarchy division is a good way to show their individuality. That is to say, the Westerners tend to break the bounds of family hierarchy and it is universal for them to call each other's name directly. It is a cultural difference about expressing in different ways.

Address forms contain distinctive linguistic and culture features, which are a good example of politeness expressions. Also, there are some differences between them about the politeness norms of address. As for Chinese, it is known to us all that they are famous for their politeness and courtesy. It commonly includes two aspects in politely addressing. One is to show respect to the one you are talking to, the other is to remain modest, while in China, when the older neighbors of the addresser have no official titles or prestigious occupational titles, Westerners can address their first names Mr./Mrs./Ms., plus last name, or zero address forms. No one think it is strange. However, it is inappropriate for Chinese to address other's first name without

other honorific appellation. It is due to this that the use of assumed kinship systems differs from each other between English and Chinese.

Different Political System

According to Chinese old feudalism, the emperor was always the most powerful one. Also, the father's power is the greatest in a family. In the patriarchal autocracy family, clan is the most powerful element for the existence of emperorship. Besides, there was an extreme strict hierarchical system in ancient feudalism. It also led to the distinct classification of the young and old, seniors and juniors, and close and distant.

Among those English-speaking countries, they protest the democratic management from the country inside with the legal restraint. In social political life, the law protects the citizens, so that the citizens do not entirely depend on the families and clans. They are just a single person without any other accessories. Therefore, the status of families and clans in Chinese are far more important than in English. Also, the English are independent and individually not getting much contact with their families, blood ties, and marriages. Kinship system is not that important for them. Thus, the classification of kinship system is not as detailed as in Chinese.

Different Economic Mode

Chinese traditional culture is a cultural form of agricultural economy as its main economy, that is, peasant culture. From ancient times, Chinese farmers were constrained on the farm land. The farm land was their life. As the peasant culture set family as a unit, men were tilling the farm and women were weaving. They could provide what they need to themselves under the Economic Net. Once leaving the family, neither men nor women can live or produce things. Under this condition, people attached more and more importance to family. That was why family was so dependable in their perception.

In English-speaking countries, they pursue individualism and independence. In Britain, for example, most families are small families, unlike that in China with a great number of siblings in a family. They emphasize the independence of personality and the family members live dispersedly. Also, when children were very young, their parents focused on developing their independence and making decisions for themselves. The closest relatives are like this, let alone the relatives who are not close. Thus, the relation by blood, marriage, and so on seems impolite. Leading a life by oneself is the most significant one in their conventional concept.

The patriarchal clan system refers to a kind of kinship system based on the blood tie, which aims to respect common ancestor and set the succession order and the different rights and obligations of the members of the different status. The patriarchal system established in the Western Zhou Dynasty. It set the patriarchal kinship, just like Confucian ritual system, so that the kinship system is very complex and varied. At the same time, an ancient Chinese society was also an autocratic society. After the Qin Dynasty unified the world, the world became one and the emperor was the largest parent. Thus, the family and clans became the nation's shadow; patriarchal kinship became the social political relations' basement.

In English-speaking countries, especially the whole European civilization system, there is an inheritance relationship with the classical democracy in Ancient Greek. Ancient Greek democracy Athens is the main representative. Engels said that Athens was a highly developed country; the Democratic Republic was directly from the clan society "People". They contracted with each other, rolled out the leaders and the country was different from China in sense, the country did not depend on the control of family to maintain the stability of the country. The most important is that in Europe, the kind of the people, for example, the paternal and maternal descent for relations are not divided; they have no distinctions. Therefore, there is no need to point out

which relatives are father's, and which ones are mother's.

Conclusion

During this study, we have been more familiar with the different causes for the differences between English and Chinese kinship systems from the perspective of language and culture. In a word, knowing the related background of a country is very useful to analyze the difference between the Chinese kinship terms and the English kinship terms. We have learned that the Chinese culture concentrates more on the family and the interrelationship, while the English emphasizes more on the individual personality and equal relationship with each other. Knowing this can also help us communicate more easily with different people with different cultural backgrounds. Chinese kinship is clear and the age is related with the social status due to the effect of Confucianism. But English kinship terms have the semantic feature of generality. In English-speaking countries, after the Industrial Revolution, people reduced and even lost in the families. So, the kinship was very simple without so many siblings. Exploring its profound significance really matters a lot, which still remains a lot to probe into.

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